



Implementation and Administration of Elemiddle Schools

District Leadership Forum

Catherine Dorigan

Research Associate

Caleb Hausman

Research Manager

Olivia Rios

Senior Research Manager

LEGAL CAVEAT

EAB Global, Inc. ("EAB") has made efforts to verify the accuracy of the information it provides to members. This report relies on data obtained from many sources, however, and EAB cannot guarantee the accuracy of the information provided or any analysis based thereon. In addition, neither EAB nor any of its affiliates (each, an "EAB Organization") is in the business of giving legal, accounting, or other professional advice, and its reports should not be construed as professional advice. In particular, members should not rely on any legal commentary in this report as a basis for action, or assume that any tactics described herein would be permitted by applicable law or appropriate for a given member's situation. Members are advised to consult with appropriate professionals concerning legal, tax, or accounting issues, before implementing any of these tactics. No EAB Organization or any of its respective officers, directors, employees, or agents shall be liable for any claims, liabilities, or expenses relating to (a) any errors or omissions in this report, whether caused by any EAB organization, or any of their respective employees or agents, or sources or other third parties, (b) any recommendation by any EAB Organization, or (c) failure of member and its employees and agents to abide by the terms set forth herein.

EAB is a registered trademark of EAB Global, Inc. in the United States and other countries. Members are not permitted to use these trademarks, or any other trademark, product name, service name, trade name, and logo of any EAB Organization without prior written consent of EAB. Other trademarks, product names, service names, trade names, and logos used within these pages are the property of their respective holders. Use of other company trademarks, product names, service names, trade names, and logos or images of the same does not necessarily constitute (a) an endorsement by such company of an EAB Organization and its products and services, or (b) an endorsement of the company or its products or services by an EAB Organization. No EAB Organization is affiliated with any such company.

IMPORTANT: Please read the following.

EAB has prepared this report for the exclusive use of its members. Each member acknowledges and agrees that this report and the information contained herein (collectively, the "Report") are confidential and proprietary to EAB. By accepting delivery of this Report, each member agrees to abide by the terms as stated herein, including the following:

1. All right, title, and interest in and to this Report is owned by an EAB Organization. Except as stated herein, no right, license, permission, or interest of any kind in this Report is intended to be given, transferred to, or acquired by a member. Each member is authorized to use this Report only to the extent expressly authorized herein.
2. Each member shall not sell, license, republish, distribute, or post online or otherwise this Report, in part or in whole. Each member shall not disseminate or permit the use of, and shall take reasonable precautions to prevent such dissemination or use of, this Report by (a) any of its employees and agents (except as stated below), or (b) any third party.
3. Each member may make this Report available solely to those of its employees and agents who (a) are registered for the workshop or membership program of which this Report is a part, (b) require access to this Report in order to learn from the information described herein, and (c) agree not to disclose this Report to other employees or agents or any third party. Each member shall use, and shall ensure that its employees and agents use, this Report for its internal use only. Each member may make a limited number of copies, solely as adequate for use by its employees and agents in accordance with the terms herein.
4. Each member shall not remove from this Report any confidential markings, copyright notices, and/or other similar indicia herein.
5. Each member is responsible for any breach of its obligations as stated herein by any of its employees or agents.
6. If a member is unwilling to abide by any of the foregoing obligations, then such member shall promptly return this Report and all copies thereof to EAB.

Table of Contents

1) Executive Overview	4
Key Observations	4
2) Implementation of Elemiddle Schools	5
Motivation for Elemiddle Model Implementation.....	5
School Structure.....	7
3) Administration of Elemiddle Schools	9
Teacher Support.....	9
High School Preparation	9
Social- Emotional Growth	11
4) Research Methodology	14
Project Challenge	14
Research Parameters	15

1) Executive Overview

Key Observations

Provide a gradual transition to the elemiddle model by adding grades one year at a time. Elemiddle schools serve the needs of both elementary-age and middle school-age students in a single school, typically through a K-8 model. Administrators at four profiled schools emphasize the importance of transitioning gradually to the elemiddle model to minimize disruption for students. For example, **School B** first retained the sixth grade class (rather than sending them to middle school). Administrators introduced seventh grade and eighth grade classes the following two years for a total three-year implementation process. Contacts believe that this gradual transition provides maximum continuity by eliminating the need for students to navigate the new social and academic environment of a separate middle school.

Prioritize staffing special area classes to minimize the impact of staffing vacancies on students. Administrators highlight that because special area teachers are shared between grades K-8 in an elemiddle model, staffing vacancies for special area classes have a greater impact than in a traditional elementary or middle school model. Contacts at **District D** note that to mitigate this problem, schools occasionally hire local art partners to replace traditional art teachers when vacancies need to be filled.

Incorporate grade level-specific social and emotional learning (SEL) practices to address unique needs across a wide range of elemiddle school students. Administrators caution that diverse SEL needs across student age groups can create problems in the elemiddle model. Because curricula that may prove effective within an elementary or middle school individually will not serve all students within an elemiddle model, administrators need to adapt SEL curricula to fit the diverse needs of student groups at an elemiddle school. Administrators at **School B** credit their restorative practices-oriented SEL curricula as key to building community across grade levels.

Implement formal leadership and skill-building programs for older students to cultivate a sense of responsibility and a singular, cross-grade community. By providing opportunities for older students to serve as role models, administrators can develop students' sense of responsibility, preparing them for the autonomy of high school. At **School C**, administrators give eighth grade students the option to spend a daily 35-minute elective period working as Teachers' Assistants in younger grades' classrooms. This builds leadership skills for older students while simultaneously creating a sense of community between grade levels.

Prepare upper grade students for high school by providing appropriate academic rigor. Administrators at profiled districts note that students moving from an elemiddle model to high school sometimes struggle with a lack of ownership and responsibility over their own education. To address this challenge, **School E** implemented an international baccalaureate (IB) program for their middle school-age students (i.e., grades 6–8). The IB program provides increased academic rigor and requires students to drive their own learning, which helps build skills necessary for academic success in high school.

2) Implementation of Elemiddle Schools

Motivation for Elemiddle Model Implementation

District Administrators Pursue the Elemiddle School Model to Minimize Student Transitions and Maximize Academic Performance

Traditional middle schools were initially designed to fit the unique educational and social needs of adolescents. However, today, many middle school administrators face high suspension rates and low-test scores.¹ In response to these struggles, some districts have transitioned to a K-8 school model, otherwise known as an “elemiddle” school.

Proponents argue that elemiddle schools provide adolescents with continuity both in their academic curricula and their social environment, allowing for a smoother transition into high school. Often, parental concerns about the negative impact of middle schools on academic performance drive the conversion to an elemiddle model.² Research has shown that students in the elemiddle model achieve superior academic results, along with an improved sense of social connection. In addition, administrators at elemiddle schools see fewer disciplinary problems and improved attendance, compared to traditional middle schools.³

Administrators at **School B** cite poor middle school academic performance as a driving factor behind the move to an elemiddle model. Teachers noticed promising K-5 students struggle when they transitioned to middle school, preventing them from entry into the top high schools in the area. Administrators petitioned the board to retain their fifth graders as sixth graders, and gradually transitioned to a full K-8 model.

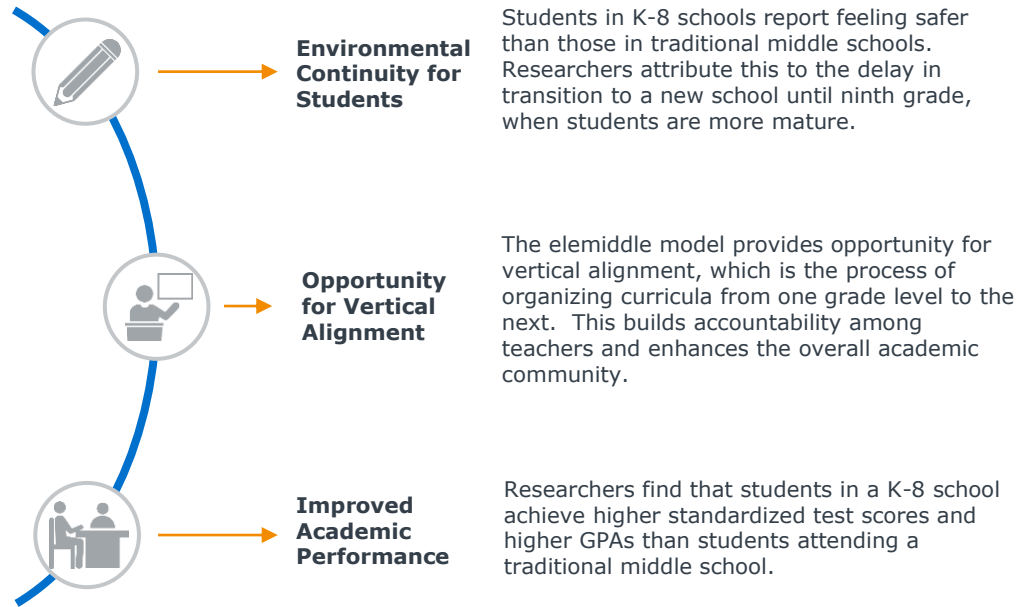
Administrators in **School C's** district sought to increase enrollment by adopting a more innovative and desirable school model. The governing board, encouraged by parents and teachers looking for a more academically challenging program, formed a committee to evaluate options. After a search process that included interviewing school administrators, the committee recommended moving to a K-8 model.

¹ *The Rise of the 'Elemiddle' School*. David L. Hough. American Association of School Administrators. <http://www.aasa.org/SchoolAdministratorArticle.aspx?id=8710>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

Benefits of the Elemiddle Model⁴

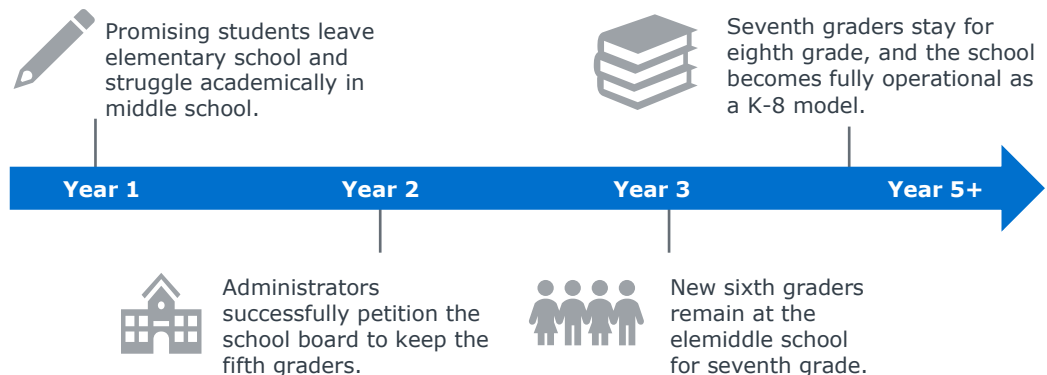


Provide a Gradual Transition to the Elemiddle Model by Incorporating One New Grade Level Annually

Administrators at **School A** and **School B** recommend a gradual implementation process when moving to an elemiddle model. They believe that phased implementation provides maximal continuity and minimal disruption for students.

When School B decided to move toward a pre-K-8 model, administrators added one new grade level per year, starting by keeping the sixth grade class in the existing pre-K-5 building. Administrators introduced seventh grade and eighth grade classes the following two years for a total three-year implementation process. Due to this transition model, no students had to move from a middle school back to the elemiddle model. By simply retaining one new grade each year, administrators were able to increase parent buy-in by minimizing destabilizing building transitions for students.

Elemiddle Implementation Timeline at *School B*



⁴ "Mayhem in the Middle: Why We Should Shift to K-8". Cheri Pierson Yecke. ACSO. <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/apr06/vol63/num07/Mayhem-in-the-Middle-Why-We-Should-Shift-to-K%E2%80%938.aspx>; "Do Middle Schools Make Sense?". Mary Tanner. Harvard Ed Magazine. <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/ed/12/09/do-middle-schools-make-sense>.

Administrators at **School C** originally operated on a trial basis as a K-3 model in a wing of the district office. The following year, they took over an empty medical facility to expand, adding an additional grade level per year until fully operational as a K-8 school. Once the model proved successful, administrators petitioned the school board for funding and opened a new school building to house their students.

School Structure

Students who have failed multiple grades or been held back can present unique behavioral problems in an elemiddle model. These students, often over 16 years old, can intimidate younger students and model age-inappropriate behavior. Contacts at **School B** solved this problem by moving these students to schools in their district serving grades 6-12.

Minimize Unsupervised Interactions Between Students Through Intentional Space Design

Within elemiddle school communities, parents worry about inappropriate or unsupervised interactions between older and younger students. To mitigate these concerns, contacts at profiled schools recommend structuring the physical space of the school to separate the younger and older students in the building. Administrators at profiled schools cluster classrooms by grade level to create separate spaces and divide younger students from older students within the larger school building. Intentional space design reduces the risk of unintended interactions, minimizing parental causes for concern.

Three Strategies to Separate Students and Alleviate Parent Concerns



Separate Bathrooms

Administrators at **School A** provide separate bathrooms for younger students to alleviate parent concerns about inappropriate unsupervised behavior. Administrators at **School B** intentionally built pre-K and kindergarten classrooms with additional space to accommodate bathrooms and cubbies inside the classroom, avoiding unsupervised interactions between students in the hallways. Contacts emphasize the importance of this separation due to differing development levels.



Different Building Entrances

Students at **School A** arrive at separate school entrances. Pre-K through third grade students enter through the gym, fourth grade students line up at one door, fifth and sixth grade students line up at a second door, and seventh and eighth grade students at a third door. By grouping students of similar grades together, administrators at **School A** minimize potential disruption.



Classrooms on Separate Floors

Parents at **School B** expressed concerns about younger students feeling intimidated walking down halls with older students. Administrators at both **School B** and **School C** group classrooms by grade level. Both designed their physical spaces so that students in the youngest grade through third grade are on the ground level, and grades four through eight are upstairs. Placing different grade levels on separate floors ensures there is little unintentional interaction between the oldest and youngest students.

Administrators at both **School C** and **District D** cluster classrooms by grade level. Contacts at School C note that clustering classrooms by grade level facilitates teacher collaboration through increased proximity to peer teachers.

Communicate Frequently and Proactively with Parents Throughout the Elemiddle Model Transition Process

Administrators at profiled schools emphasize both proactive and ongoing communication to minimize parental pushback to school-model changes. Contacts at **School B**, **District D**, and **School E** held in-person meetings with parents and

stakeholders to communicate changes throughout the implementation process for new school models.

At School B, administrators held three open houses across the elemiddle implementation process to address any questions or concerns with the new model. Administrators found that parents' reservations decreased over time, as elementary school parents gained more exposure to the otherwise unfamiliar middle school components of the model. In contrast, middle school parents already had experience with the local elementary school model through their students' earlier years in the district, thus minimizing their skepticism over the new elemiddle model.

Contacts at School E highlight the importance of ongoing communication with parents after implementation. Administrators found that emails and presentations were unlikely to garner parent responses, so they opted for in-person communication channels instead.

At District D, school administrators provide both upfront and ongoing communication. They held listening sessions for parents to address concerns and garner feedback during the district's restructuring process. In addition, administrators give regular updates on the process through school newspapers, letters home, updates on the website, and school board meetings. This provides both proactive messaging to parents, along with continuing information and support.

Managing Communication Strategies for Various Stakeholders

Parents



Administrators at profiled schools recommend communicating early and often with parents throughout the transition process. Administrators at **School B** used automated phone calls, open houses, and updates in the parent newsletter to communicate in advance of the change. After the transition, administrators at **School E** found in-person meetings about parental concerns to be the most effective communication method. The principal and other administrators hold an open forum once a quarter for parents to ask questions and discuss concerns.



Teachers

Administrators at profiled schools caution that teacher pushback during the implementation process can be a significant challenge. Administrators at **School E** communicated changes related to the school model during staff meetings. Contacts recommend outlining the reasons behind deciding to move to a K-8 model to help staff see the benefits to students.

3) Administration of Elemiddle Schools

Teacher Support

While profiled districts did not address these issues for counselors specifically, similar issues arose when scheduling across districts for shared support staff. For example, **School C** shares a part-time speech therapist, social worker, and school psychologist with other schools in the district. Support staff work with each school one day per week. School administrators work independently from the district to coordinate support staff schedules.

Mitigate Staffing Challenges Unique to the Elemiddle Model by Maximizing Staff Flexibility

In an elemiddle model, shared special area teachers (e.g. music teachers, art teachers, physical education teachers) work across a larger number of grades, as compared to separate elementary and middle school models. Since special area staff serve a larger population of students, they consequently face greater demands on their time and energy. In addition, any staff vacancies create a bigger disruption to the school by impacting a larger number of students.

District D is now moving away from a K-8 model back towards a traditional elementary/middle school model. Contacts cite problems with teacher licensure requirements and difficulties with filling specialty teacher vacancies as reasons for this transition. At District D, a single specialty area teacher typically serves all grades (K-8) in the elemiddle model. To mitigate these high demands on special area teachers, administrators at District D occasionally hire local art partners to fill in for art teacher vacancies.

Administrators at **School E** highlight lunch periods as one area where staff shortages cause difficulty. Contacts recommend shared lunch periods (e.g., fourth graders eat lunch at the same time as eighth graders) to make staff use more efficient. In this model, staff can supervise multiple grades at a time, and older students can provide some additional support to younger students in the cafeteria.

At **School A**, state-level elementary teacher certifications train teachers to teach students up through sixth grade. While departmentalization (i.e., teachers specializing in specific subject areas) can occasionally cause difficulty due to the need for additional certifications to teach in different subject areas, in this case, departmentalization allows teachers greater flexibility. For example, during fifth and sixth grade, teachers run social studies and science courses on a semesterly, rather than year-long, calendar. This enables teachers to serve both grades across a single academic year, alleviating potential staffing shortages.

High School Preparation

Departmentalize Early to Prepare Upper Grade Students for High School

Administrators at profiled schools note that students moving from the elemiddle model to high school often struggle with a lack of ownership and responsibility over their own education. In the elemiddle model, parents and teachers may continue to treat older students like elementary school students. This prevents older students from gaining the independence and self-sufficiency they need to succeed in high school.

Administrators at **School A**, **School B**, and **School E** all departmentalize their teachers, rotating students throughout the school day between multiple teachers who each specialize in a specific subject area. Contacts at **School A**, **School B**, **School C**, and **School E** recommend departmentalizing in the upper grades to acclimate students to working with multiple teachers before they start high school, where this practice is common.

At School B, departmentalization begins in third grade, where one teacher leads all math classes, one teacher leads all reading courses, and one teacher leads both science and social studies for all homeroom groups.

Teachers in the international baccalaureate (IB) program at School E departmentalize for all students in sixth, seventh, and eighth grade.

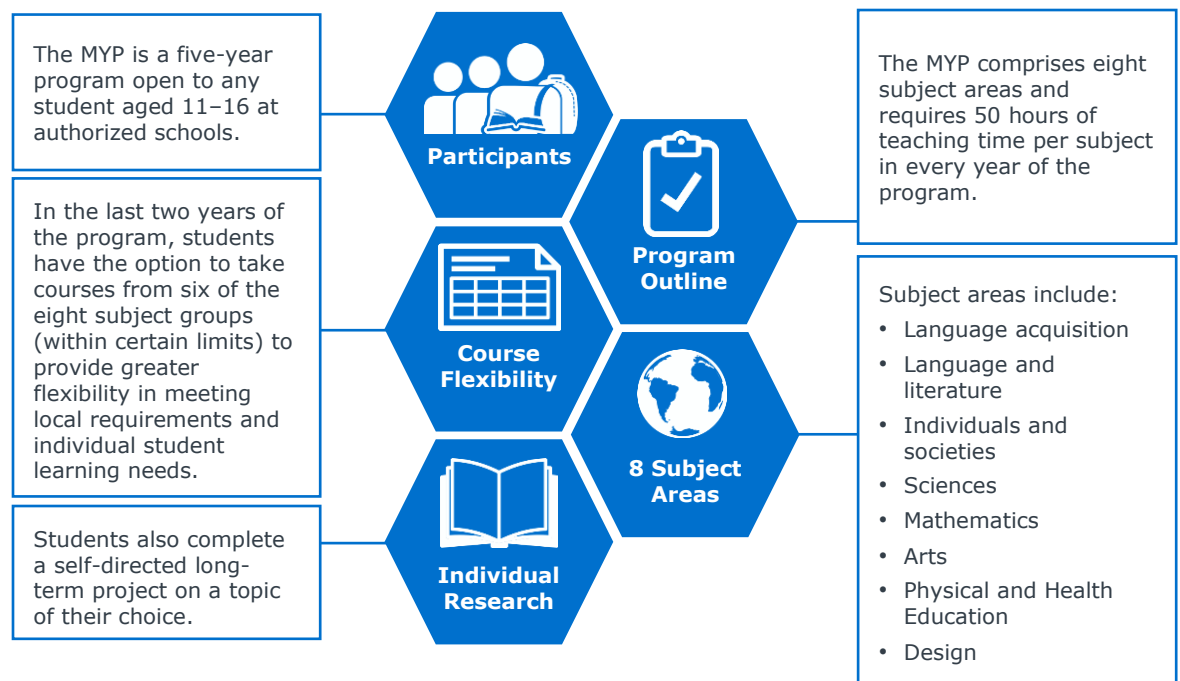
School A starts departmentalizing in fourth and fifth grade, where one teacher leads science and math classes, and another leads language arts and social studies classes. Administrators rotate students through daily classes based on homeroom group, rather than keeping them in the same classroom all day, as would be the case in a traditional elementary school academic model. This structure gives students familiarity with departmentalized scheduling that they will later encounter in high school, easing the elemiddle to high school transition.

Provide Challenging Curricular Options for Upper-Grade Students to Ease High School Transition

Administrators at some profiled schools had concerns about the level of academic challenge provided to upper-grade students. These administrators recommend providing opportunities for advanced curricula and elective choice to prepare students for the academic challenges and structure of high school.

To provide better preparation for the high school transition, **School E** offers an international baccalaureate (IB) program for their middle school-age students (i.e., grades 6–8). The IB program provides increased academic rigor and requires students to drive their own learning, which helps build skills necessary for academic success in high school.

International Baccalaureate (IB) Middle Years Programme (MYP) at School E



Social-Emotional Growth

Restorative practices proactively build healthy relationships among the school community to address and prevent harmful behavior or conflict. These practices enforce a school's core values and build empathy and understanding among the community.⁵

EAB's report [Behavior Management and Disciplinary Strategies](#) expands on how restorative practices can prevent negative behaviors and limit exclusionary discipline practices in school communities (pages 11-12).

Providing some degree of elective choice allows upper-grade students to practice managing the greater academic freedom they will receive in high school. At **School A**, upper grade students share a daily elective period, giving students some choice in their courses. Elementary school students do not get a choice in the electives they take, instead rotating through different electives based on the day. However, students in grades 6-8 choose one elective course that they attend every day for a quarter before switching to a new elective for the next quarter. This helps prepare students for the independence of high school course choice and academic discipline exploration.

At **School C**, students are required to take art, music and physical education from kindergarten through fourth grade. Students in fifth grade onwards take one elective class every day for an entire semester. They rank their top three elective options, which allows administrators to balance enrollment across elective options, preventing over- or under-enrollment.

Align Social and Emotional Curricula with the Diverse Needs of Each Grade Level across an Elemiddle School

Administrators caution that different social-emotional learning (SEL) needs across student age groups are exacerbated by the wider age range of the elemiddle model. For example, upper grade students need more training on conflict management for issues such as bullying, while younger students need support on learning to share. Since curricula that may prove effective within elementary or middle schools individually will not serve all students within an elemiddle model, administrators need to adapt SEL curricula to fit the diverse needs of student groups at an elemiddle school.

When moving to an elemiddle model, administrators at **District D** suggest considering ways to address students' diverse SEL needs, such as by providing grade level-specific SEL programming. Contacts at **School E** align SEL curricula to fit the needs of different grade levels through their MASK program in partnership with Arizona State University. College students come in to mentor middle school students on age-specific topics, such as the dangers of social media and bullying. Then, the middle school students work with younger students to communicate the same topics in an age-appropriate manner.

- Administrators at **School B** credit their restorative practices-oriented SEL curricula as key to building community and addressing the specific needs of upper-grade students. Creating common ground among faculty and staff encourages them to lead with empathy when dealing with student conflicts. This technique, modeled by the adults in the community, is passed along to the students as a conflict-management technique as well.

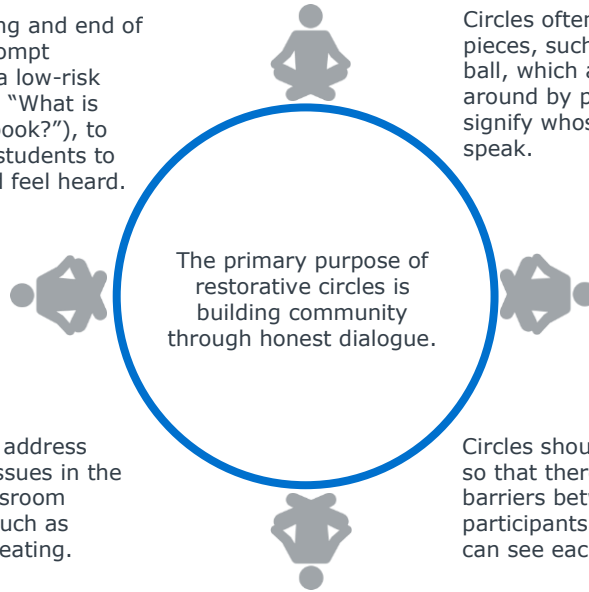
When administrators first implemented restorative practices, they took faculty and staff off-campus for a two-day training retreat. The team learned about practices such as restorative circles, where participants share personal anecdotes and feelings to build empathy and trust within the community. Homeroom teachers across all grade levels hold restorative circles at least three times a week with their classes. Students in grades 6-8 participate in a weekly inter-grade community circle to celebrate achievements, provide acknowledgements, or offer apologies. This weekly practice helps to build a sense of inter-grade community in a larger sense as well.

⁵ International Institute for Restorative Practices. <https://www.iirp.edu/>.

Building Community Through Restorative Circles

At the beginning and end of each circle, prompt students with a low-risk question, (e.g. "What is your favorite book?"), to encourage all students to participate and feel heard.

Circles often use talking pieces, such as a stick or ball, which are passed around by participants to signify whose turn it is to speak.

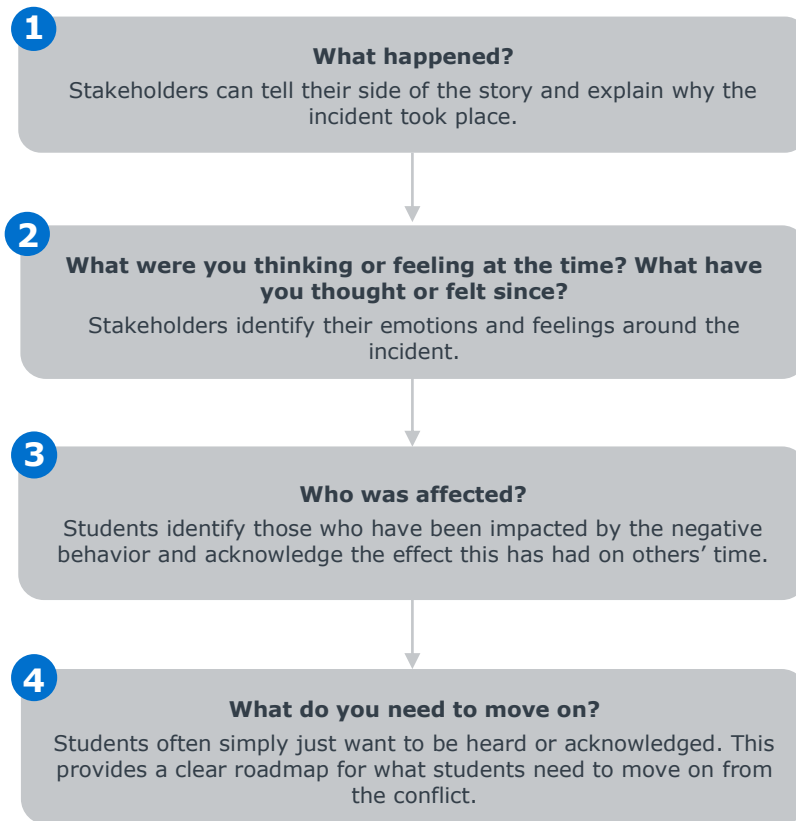


Use circles to address overarching issues in the school or classroom community, such as bullying or cheating.

Circles should be structured so that there are no barriers between participants, and people can see each other clearly.

If an issue arises between students, faculty, or staff, administrators at School B use restorative conferences as a conflict-management technique. These conferences serve as an opportunity for key stakeholders (e.g., students, teachers, parents) to gather together and discuss the incident, with the goal of developing an agreement to repair the harm caused and improve future behavior. While administrators at profiled schools do not formally track metrics to measure the impact of an elemiddle model, contacts at School B credit restorative conferences with a significant drop in disciplinary action since implementation.

Restorative Conference Framework in use at *School B*



Foster Inter-Grade Relationships through in-Class Programs to Build Community

Administrators emphasize the importance of building school-wide community in an elemiddle model, due to the wide range of student ages. Specifically, administrators recommend providing formal structures for inter-grade interaction to foster relationships between younger and older students. Administrators at **School A** and **School C** provide opportunities for older students to work in the classroom with younger students through elective programs.

At **School E**, paired older and younger grade levels share a common lunch period. Administrators view this as an opportunity to build leadership skills for older students by emphasizing their responsibility to act as role models for the younger students.

At School C, administrators give eighth grade students the option to spend a daily 35-minute elective period working as teachers' assistants in younger grades' classrooms. Selected students clean classrooms, prepare materials, tutor individual students, or lead activities for small groups of younger students. This builds leadership skills for older students while simultaneously creating a sense of community between different grade levels. In addition, fifth grade and second grade classrooms participate in "reading buddy" sessions once every two weeks.

As part of their quarterly elective cycle, seventh and eighth grade students at School A can opt into a classroom assistant rotation. The school guidance counselor and school speech pathologist provide training for students who choose this elective. Students pair with a pre-K, first, or second grade classroom, where they work for three days per week for a full quarter. While working in these classrooms, students assist with lesson planning or classroom setup. They also work one-on-one with students needing extra support. For example, they might facilitate literacy activities for a student struggling with sight words. This fosters a sense of responsibility among older students as they see themselves as role models for the younger students.

4) Research Methodology

Project Challenge

Leadership at a member district approached the Forum with the following questions:

- Why did administrators at contact districts choose to implement an elemiddle school model?
- What was the timeline to transition to an elemiddle school?
- How did administrators at contact districts communicate the value of the elemiddle school model to parents?
- What major challenges did administrators at contact districts face during elemiddle school implementation?
- What would contact districts do differently if implementing an elemiddle school again?
- How do administrators configure the physical design of the elemiddle school as it relates to grade configuration?
- How do administrators at contact districts assign classroom teachers in elemiddle schools?
- How do administrators assign specialist teachers?
- How do teacher certifications impact staffing assignments?
- How do administrators distribute counselors and other support staff within an elemiddle school?
- How do counseling certifications impact staffing assignments?
- If teachers or counselors work across different district schools, how do district administrators coordinate staff schedules?
- What is the daily schedule for elemiddle school students at contact districts?
- What are the differences between elementary school schedules and middle school schedules?
- How do administrators coordinate differing schedules between elementary and middle school students?
- How do administrators incorporate opportunities for students of all grade levels to interact in an elemiddle school?
- How have elemiddle schools impacted student achievement, climate, culture, and engagement at contact districts?
- What data or metrics do administrators at contact districts use to track the impacts of elemiddle schools?

The Forum consulted the following sources for this report:

- EAB’s internal and online research libraries (eab.com)
- The Chronicle of Higher Education (<http://chronicle.com>)
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (<http://nces.ed.gov/>)
- *The Rise of the ‘Elemiddle’ School*. David L. Hough. American Association of School Administrators. <http://www.aasa.org/SchoolAdministratorArticle.aspx?id=8710>
- *Is the Time Right for “Elemiddles?”*. Education World. https://www.educationworld.com/a_admin/admin/admin324.shtml
- “Will middle schools become a thing of the past?”. Lois K. Solomon. South Florida Sun Sentinel. <https://www.sun-sentinel.com/news/education/fl-pn-schools-k8-story.html>

Research Parameters

The Forum interviewed school- and district-level administrators across the United States who oversee “elemiddle” schools.

A Guide to Institutions Profiled in this Brief

Institution	Grades Served	Location	Approximate Enrollment
School A	Pre-K – 8	Mid-Atlantic	600
School B	Pre-K – 8	Mid-Atlantic	800
School C	Pre-K – 8	Mountain West	800
District D	K – 8	Midwest	76,000
School E	K – 8	Mountain West	900